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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 003408

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN PALESTINIANS NOTCH UP CRITICISM OF ARAFAT

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EDWARD W. GNEHM FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) While Jordanian Palestinians have long grumbled about Arafat, two prominent Jordanian Palestinian leaders recently expressed to us a new level of criticism of the PA President. Some Palestinian Jordanians are even calling into question Arafat's true nationality in another round of anti-Arafat conspiracy theories. Despite the intensified criticism from the more critical thinkers here, Arafat remains the emotion-evoking symbol of the Palestinian people for the majority of Palestinian Jordanians. End Summary.

WHO IS ARAFAT?

2. (C) Poloff met separately with former Prime Minister Taher al-Masri and former Royal Court Advisor Adnan Abu Odeh on June 19, prominent Jordanians of Palestinian origin. Both offered harsh criticism of Arafat. Taher al-Masri, whose brother Maher is a member of Arafat's cabinet, complained that Arafat is a major obstacle to reform, which the PA desperately needs. At a World Affairs Council the same night, he told the elite audience that Palestinians should not reject out of hand U.S. pressure to reform the PA and reminded the audience that it was Arafat who refused to sign the Judiciary and Basic Law. Note: Jordanian press editorials have also been calling for PA reform, "even though it is being directed by the U.S." Al-Masri also confided to Poloff that "if something happens to Arafat, it would not be a bad thing" and prefaced his comments by saying he would not have said that a few months back.

3. (C) Al-Masri commented on the new PNA cabinet by saying it was "an okay first step, as long as it isn't isolated." He also reported that at least 5-6 of those around Arafat--including Abu Mazen, Hikmat Zeid, and Nabil Amr--were really tough on him in a recent meeting on reform, and Hikmat Zeid--who is not part of Arafat's new Cabinet--walked out of the room after calling Arafat an "S.O.B.". According to al-Masri, the new PA Minister of Interior and former Special Representative of the PLO Commission in Jordan, Abdel Razzak al-Yahya, was a moderate who had built a million dollar mansion in Amman's ritzy Abdoun area while working for Arafat.

4. (C) Abu Odeh, while never fond of Arafat, bitterly complained to Poloff about continued corruption among Arafat and his cronies and derided Arafat for his limited vocabulary and his inability to think conceptually. Abu Odeh cited several examples of the continued corruption and also criticized Arafat's campaign to damage the reputation of Mustapha Bourgouti, who was being targeted because of his increased popularity and his clean reputation. In response to a question about what the U.S. could do to push PA reform, Abu Odeh said the U.S. should open an investigation into PA corruption and cite several specific examples. By doing so, the U.S. could improve its own reputation at the grass roots level, but could avoid blaming Arafat directly. While Abu Odeh applauded some of the new PA Cabinet members, he derided the choice of Yahya as Interior Minister. Like al-Masri, he pointed to the million dollar villa in Abdoun that he said Arafat built for Yahya and said that Arafat was calling on Yahya to return the favor.

5. (C) Interestingly, both Al-Masri and Abu Odeh told Poloff that conspiracies about Arafat are on the rise since Arafat's negotiations with Israel to lift the sieges on the Muqatta and the Church of Nativity. Al-Masri told Poloff that at a recent social gathering, an elderly Palestinian refugee alleged that Arafat was originally a Jew. Al-Masri said many were now questioning Arafat's Palestinian bonafides and even al-Masri asked why there were few, if any, records of Arafat's childhood days in Egypt. "You can't find one neighbor or one childhood friend of Arafat!" Abu Odeh reported similar statements and said people here were questioning whether Arafat was Palestinian or Egyptian.

COMMENT

16. (C) While criticism of Arafat and PA corruption are not new, we are seeing a resurgence of criticism of Arafat similar to what we were hearing prior to Israeli actions that isolated Arafat in the Muqatta. Still, these recent comments suggest that at least two of the more critically thinking Palestinian Jordanians are beginning to recognize Arafat's liabilities. This does not hold true for the vast majority of Palestinian Jordanians who continue to see Arafat not only as the President of the PNA, but the symbol of the Palestinian struggle as well. Israeli actions that isolate Arafat--such as the re-occupation of Ramallah--only strengthen Arafat's emotional appeal here, and make it more difficult for voices like al-Masri and Abu Odeh to be heard. Gnehm